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ABSTRACT

Comparing cultural conceptions of sexism to those of racism, this paper identifies lack of contact, social invisibility, ethnocentrism, competition, and unequal power as factors that negatively affect women in the work place. Possible female responses to these factors include: (1) acquiescence to male dominance; (2) aggression; (3) acting and thinking as males do; or (4) avoidance of male dominated work situations. This paper predicts six stages of a woman's reactions and actions in work environments. These stages include ignorance, contact, competition or hostility, accommodation, and assimilation into male dominated environments. The paper concludes that males and females need to learn to understand sex differences, that men should learn to express emotion and feelings, and that women should strive to become more competitive. Six references are included. (JHP)

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BREAKING UP THAT OLD GANG: MALE-FEMALE CONFLICT ON THE JOB

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by

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BREAKING UP THAT OLD GANG:
MALE-FEMALE CONFLICT ON THE JOB

Women are getting a lot of "help" these days. As we are making our little baby steps into the man's world of management, every writer and would-be psychologist is having his/her turn at telling us how to do it. Unfortunately, most of these experts are busy telling us how to become just like men. Typical is this quote from PSYCHOLOGY TODAY: "They (women) must learn to recognize--as most men do--the reality of the way management functions. They must either adjust to that reality or pay the price" (January 1977). All of these helpers start with one basic assumption, that the old way, the male way, is the right way; and, that women, to be successful, should also learn to behave right.

What this suggests, however, is that we didn't learn a thing from the turmoils of the sixties. The Civil Rights Movement forces us to take a look at us--white middle -class Americans--in our solitary rightness. We learned that different doesn't necessarily mean wrong, and we learned that other cultures, though different, do have something to offer that could contribute to the fullness of our lives. A whole discipline--cross-cultural communications--sprang up, and phrases were coined so that we could discuss, study, and learn in our new discipline. We moved from the lesson of the "Ugly American," going around the world

expecting others to do things our way, the right way, to a new outlook. We rejected both the homogeneous (going native) and the heterogenous (stubbornly refusing to adapt to another culture) positions of communicating cross-culturally. Instead we learned that there is a third position, a middle point whereby we retain the best of both cultures to come up with a new standard, new and more productive ways of behaving. For instance, from the American Indians we learned about Indian time, our internal clocks. We can quit being slaves to the timepiece, and when appropriate, can relax and do things when we feel the time is right; we can get in touch with ourselves. From the Japanese we learned about participative management and consensus decision-making, with the result that we can add that to our repertoire of management tools and use it to get high commitment. What we learned is that we cannot successfully force the rest of humankind to do things our way, the right way. Instead, we can learn from others but still keep the best of our own. Why, then, do women have to become like men? Why do we have to "adjust to that reality or pay the price?" Is it because we have nothing of value to offer? I agree that there are some things we can learn from men; I'd give a lot for some parts of their conditioning such as having learned early to shoot pool (for the angles) and play baseball (for the judgment) so I'd be a better racquetball player. However, there are many factors in my conditioning that would be very helpful and meaingful to the men we all work with, such as better perceptivity, and more direct conflict handling. And, it is from that relatively new discipline of cross-cultural communication that we can find some help to gain the ideal, or androgynous, mode of behavior on the job.

To better understand what is happening with males and females who are newly working together, we need to first define a culture. An accepted academic definition is that it is "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, beliefs, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community population." Also helpful is the rather similar definition of a subculture: "a group differentiated by status, ethnic background, residence, religion, or other factors that functionally unify the group and act collectively on each member." I submit then that one of those factors that differentiate and act collectively on its members is sex, making this group (males or females) as much a subculture as any group differentiated by race. Thus, if we take a look at cross-cultural theory, we find many similarities in those two situations labelled racism and sexism. For instance, there are certain identified factors which affect the emergence and stabilization of racism which are equally true of sexism:

(1) Contact (and here we mean introduction of the females into the previously all-male work group).

(2) Social Visibility (we can tell the difference by skin color, symbol such as a cross or Star of David, or sex--thus the category defines the experience; the Other becomes an It rather than a Thou).

(3) Ethnocentrism (the dominant group has strong positive feelings towards own group and negative feelings towards the other groups. The own group is the center of the universe, others should be like the own group. The dominant group defines the in-group virtues and the out-group vices, such as masculinely aggressive and a go-getter, or femininely over-emotional.)

(4) Competition (People typically seek to improve their position with regard to those things which they define as good, worthwhile and desirable. If two groups both believe they have a just claim upon the same scarce "good" things, their relationship will be characterized by competition and conflict. Just stand around Newsline and listen to the comments if a female promotion is announced).

(5) Unequal power (Power serves two functions: protection against helplessness (Helplessness being one of the basic elements in anxiety). Second, it functions as protection against feelings or being regarded as insignificant. Weakness--the absence of power--can be overcome through gaining a sense of participation in the dominant group).

Given the presence of some or all of the above factors, we can assume the emergence and stabilization of racism, or sexism. And thus we can also apply the cross-cultural theory describing the possible responses on the part of the minority group to racism or sexism:

1. Acceptance - This is an adaptive mechanism in which the minority group accommodates and acquiesces to dominance, becomes resigned to it. (An interesting side effect is that it may lead to group self-hatred).

   For example: For years women didn't apply to become pilots because that was a man's job. Women couldn't get into medical, architectural, engineering and theology schools, and unions, etc., so they didn't evey try. And they joined the men in looking askance at the few women who did want to try.

2. Aggression - This is striking back in the fury of frustration. This could range from humor to art to music to derogatory words to irresponsible and awkward work to high turnover to sneak acts of open aggression. (This aggression may be in-group aggression, redirected towards members of their own group or other minorities).

3. Assimilation - A desire to lose the minority group identity and become socially and culturally fused with the dominant group. For immigrant Caucasian groups, children formed the bridge. For racially different groups, it is accomplished by "passing." For women, though almost impossible, this is learning how to act and think on the job "like a man."

4. Avoidance - Staying away from contact with whatever causes pain through isolation, migration, separatism.

   An example: Forming separatist groups such as Professional Women Accountants, and Black or Women's Studies Departments.

Given that racism or sexism has emerged, and that the minority group can react in one of the above ways, it is also possible to predict the stages through which the process will pass; these stages can be described on a continuum:

ignore-ance (out-of-awareness)	contact	competition (hostility)	accommodation	assimilation

The ignore-ance, or out-of-awareness, point was back in the "good old days" when women, if in the work force, knew their place -- secretaries, school teachers, maids, clerks, etc., certainly not in management. Contact starts with the introduction of the first female into a formally all-male job, such

as management, or the cockpit, or the telephone line crew. That stage is quickly followed by the competitive stage, which is largely an economic competition or over some other scarce resource such as power. And the usual response to seeing an out-group gaining some of your scarce resource is to generate conflict. For instance, there were some airline captains who claimed they would refuse to take off with a woman in their cockpit. Or, the conflict can be even more subtle such as putting a woman into a job in which she is almost guaranteed to fail.

The accommodation stage is that of adjustment, in which the incoming group learns the language of the dominant group. learns the ins and outs of doing things. For instance, women are just learning how to aggressively go after a promotion they really want. In talking to an applicant who had just been informed of an upcoming interview in another department, she was asked what she was doing to get ready. She replied, "I thought that would be cheating!" And after one manager had interviewed several female candidates, he indicated shock when he related that only one had written a follow-up note reiterating interest and appreciation. Yet none of the others even knew they should do such a thing. The final point, assimilation, is when the out group has become part of, as much as possible, the dominant group. They've learned to dress like, talk like, and play politics like the dominant group. They belong to the same clubs, eat at the same restaurants and live in the "same class" neighborhood. They play golf!!

There are several factors which will affect the rate at which the two groups move through the above stages, these factors determining the rate of assimilation:

Strength of the culture - If either culture is close, or has very strong conditioning, the rate of assimilation will be slower. Sex roles in our culture are very strong, emphasizing differences rather than similarities. Therefore, assimilation rate should be slower.

Racial type - Easily identifiable differences (such as skin color) will slow the rate of assimilation. Sex type is as easily identifiable and will equally slow the rate.

Size of group - The larger the incoming group, the slower the rate of assimilation. Obviously, the incoming group of female pilots was potentially very large, but initially very small.

Rate of Influx - The more rapid the influx, the slower the rate of assimilation. The more that enter the dominant group at the same time, the greater is the tendency to "stick together" for comfort and thus slow the assimilation. Also, a slower rate will gain greater acceptance.

Area of dispersion - The greater the area, the more rapid the rate of assimilation. One female assigned to each pilot domicile may have increased the acceptance of female pilots. More than one may have the same effect as rapid influx (above).

Class - The higher the education, income, and occupational level of the incoming group, the more rapid the rate of assimilation. In the case of females, higher education and sometimes experience is required of the females -- perhaps one way of "saving face" for the dominant male group.

Predisposition to change - The greater the predisposition to change of the incoming group, the more rapid the rate. Flexibility and adaptability will make it easier for females to get in.

Degree of economic competition - The greater the degree of economic competition, the slower the rate. If civil rights had included women earlier in the movement, the rate may have been faster since the economy was better and more jobs were available.

Proximity to homeland - The greater the proximity and access to the homeland of the incoming group, the slower will be the rate of assimilation. Homeland in this case is really home -- where we go every night. Most of us go home to a male, whether he be spouse, father, brother, or S.O. So, though we're struggling during the day to be different and enter a new culture, we go home at night to the same old conditioning. That really slows down the assimilation rate!

Referring back to the continuum of stages thru which cultures pass on the way to assimilation, this theory suggests that assimilation is the endpoint. However, in reviewing recent history of minority groups moving into more equal positions with the dominant white middle class, we see that assimilations has not been the endpoint. As suggested early in this article, there have been many changes in and influences on the majority group by our emerging minorities. And therein appears to be the only expected difference between racism and sexism. To overcome racism, the dominant group has changed: we have learned about cultural differences in behavior and expectations, and learned how to accept and manage those differences in the work place. However, to overcome sexism, women are expected to change. We're expected to become like men, or "to recognize -- as most men do -- the reality ..."

There is one position which should be added to the continuum as the endpoint, that position being androgyny. It would be the equivalent of

of cultural pluralism, already reached or strived for in transracial behavior. It is the point at which we do, indeed, both change. We take the best of both traditional behaviors, male and female. Men can learn to express emotion and deal diretly with feelings instead of indirectly in decision making. Women can learn to be competitive, to have that "killer instinct" which can keep them in the fight to the end. Women can learn not to self-blame. Both can learn to share more responsibilities, because by sharing those, we have both earned more privileges.

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